

Testimony to the Judiciary Committee
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In Support of HB-6425 and SB-1035

I'm Dr. Gail Canzano. I'm a clinical psychologist and a family member of a murder victim. I'm here today speaking to you on behalf of 81 individuals who have joined me as signatories in a letter to the General Assembly asking for repeal of the death penalty. We have all lost family members to homicide in the state of Connecticut and we are united by our shared belief that Connecticut's death penalty fails the families of murder victims.

Some years ago I sat in a courtroom not far from here and stared down the man who savagely murdered my brother-in-law. It brought me not one moment of solace and it's not something I ever wish to repeat. My family was actually quite fortunate because ours was not a capital case. We appeared in court only 2 or 3 times before a plea bargain sent the murderer to prison for 30 years with a guarantee that he would serve every day of his sentence. Two years after the murder, we were finished with the criminal justice system and we were free to focus on healing our broken hearts.

As a clinical psychologist, I have many years of experience treating individuals suffering from effects of trauma. And from a professional standpoint I can assure you that the death penalty is nothing but harmful to the families of murder victims. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the notion of retributive justice is incompatible with psychological adjustment post homicide trauma. Homicide grief is not assuaged by the quest for retribution; it is, in fact, worsened. The second is that the judicial process in capital cases has the effect of ensnaring family members in a decades-long battle for justice in which every single court appearance re-traumatizes the family. The death penalty sentences family members to decades of grief with never-ending publicity and court proceedings. This results in notoriety for the murderer and years of suffering and uncertainty for the families left behind. And all of this for a false promise, because in the end we execute no one. One man in 50 years and only because he volunteered. We have people on death row who have been there for more than 20 years with no execution in sight.

We need to be honest about this with the people of Connecticut. The death penalty is a cruel hoax. It accomplishes nothing, it wastes millions of dollars and it further victimizes families who are already broken with grief. If we have any real empathy for the families of murder victims, we'll stop putting them through this. We'll see to it that we replace capital punishment with life in prison and no possibility of release. And we'll use our fiscal resources for services that provide appropriate support to the families left behind. If we can have the courage to do this, we will give families of murder victims real justice that is both swift and certain.